

*2006 Fall Congregation*

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I am at the other end of the learning curve from all you graduates. I am just beginning my life at UBC. Having been here in Vancouver for four and three-quarter months now, I can't quite call myself new anymore, but I sure can't claim to be experienced. You graduates, on the other hand are all old-timers. You have successfully weeded your way through long hours of study, through the challenges and rewards of new friendships, through the inevitable frustrations of dealing with a large institution. You are the experts in the room. So it seems a little presumptuous for me to be up here at the podium. But I am the President of UBC, so I really must say something.

Rather than presume to share my thoughts on what this occasion might mean to you our wonderful graduates, I hope you will forgive me if I step into another role, that of a parent, and reflect upon what this day means to a person who is lucky enough to have a child.

Don't get me wrong, I am not speaking on behalf of all the parents in this great Chan Centre. Our relationships as parents and children are far too varied and far too complex for me to capture all the emotions that are floating around today. No, I simply want to reflect for a few moments on what a graduation means to *this* parent – one whose

children are still too young to have graduated. This speech is a way of preparing for how I might feel when I am sitting in a room like this watching one of my children cross the stage as a university graduate. For those of you watching a father or mother cross the stage, I invite you to join me in my little thought experiment!

Like so many family occasions, this one prompts me to think back a generation or two. It is important for me to set that stage by telling you that I am adopted. So I don't actually know whether or not I come from a long line of university graduates – I suspect not. But I do know that my wonderful adoptive father was the first person in his Newfoundland family to attend a university, and that my adoptive mother had to leave high school in Montreal to work to support her family when my grandfather lost his job because of illness. So, like so many of you in this room, I have a profound sense of how precious a university education is, how it builds a sense of obligation to give back in some way.

Which brings me to what it is that this particular university, the University of British Columbia, hopes to draw out from our students

and from you graduates. I am sure that you have all heard that UBC aspires to graduate what we call “exceptional global citizens”.

I must admit that when I first heard that goal, taken from our Trek 2010 vision statement, I was a little taken aback. As an international lawyer, as a person who has spent his whole career promoting international norms, and as a committed participant in various United Nations initiatives in the protection and promotion of human rights, I could be expected to rally round the concept of “global citizenship”. But from the beginning, I have experienced a slight discomfort with the phrase. With just a little bit of thought I came to recognize why. It was the obvious association of the term “global citizenship” with the prevalent and typically uncritical invocation of the term “globalization”.

In speaking of our goal to promote global citizenship and a global role for the university, we must not be constrained by the rhetoric of globalization. Yes, global market opportunities are greater than ever, as is global economic competition. But global citizenship is about more than looking for exciting jobs in Hong Kong, London or New York. It is about more than building-up BC and Canada’s

international trade. It must be about something different than re-colonizing the world through global citizens who are merely agents of economic domination.

As a parent, as one who hopes to see his own children become global citizens, I want to rescue the concept of global citizenship from the rhetoric of globalization.

The notion of global citizenship is far from new. Its earliest expression is to be found in the words of the Greek cynic philosopher Diogenes, who described himself as a cosmopolite—literally, a citizen of the world.<sup>1</sup> Of course, the known world was a much smaller place in the 4th century BC, but I think we can interpret Diogenes' remark to mean much the same today as it meant in his time: that to be a citizen of the world is to be one who defies the narrow boundaries of nationalism; who is free of the prejudices such a nationalism might impose; who has some understanding of other peoples, other nations, other languages, other cultures and traditions different from one's own.

Diogenes, speaking as a philosopher, is making a further claim, that the world of ideas cannot be hedged in by time or place, and that the intellect must seek inspiration and truth from as broad a range of influences and experiences as possible. This idea inspired philosopher Immanuel Kant as well, whose commitment to “cosmopolitanism” links directly to a thoughtful contemporary commitment to global citizenship. Freedom of intellectual inquiry and openness to diverse influences: these insights of Diogenes and Kant are as important today as they were 2400 years ago or two centuries ago; indeed one might say that the rational search for knowledge across all boundaries is the very *raison d’etre* of the university. As learners and scholars, consciously or unconsciously, we lay claim to the rights and freedoms of global citizenship because without that breadth of vision, without the capacity or willingness to benefit from the world of ideas and diverse practices we cannot hope to make any meaningful contributions ourselves.

As a citizen, one enjoys the kind of rights and protections that membership in a society will confer; but one also has a duty to ensure that others enjoy those same rights and protections, and that entails

action—political action; community action; and social action. To be a citizen is almost the antithesis of being a consumer – it is active, not passive.

It is true, as I suggested earlier, that in certain respects the language of global citizenship and the rhetoric of globalization overlap. Both seek the overturning of traditional barriers that separate peoples, nations, or governments; both proclaim the value of a new internationalism stressing cross-cultural collaboration; both speak to the need to transcend boundaries and borders, whether commercial, cultural, or intellectual. But global citizenship—at least, as I have been using the term—goes much further than this, because it is motivated by something other than the desire for profit or the will to power: it is sustained by a recognition that, as moral beings, we must help one another; that endowed as we are with conscience and intelligence, we cannot turn our backs on those who are less fortunate than ourselves without in some way compromising ourselves and denying our common humanity. In the powerful words of W. H. Auden, we must love one another, or die.

So as a parent, looking at all the graduates who are about to cross this stage, I am filled with hope. A couple of months ago, I asked some UBC students what they thought was meant by “global citizenship”. Here’s what they answered: It means caring and acting. Caring about our fellow citizens right here in Vancouver. Caring about the challenges faced by our fellows in all parts of the world. Acting by making choices in our own lives that support respect for others and fairness in resource consumption. Acting by working in solidarity with our neighbours, by volunteering in the Downtown Eastside, like over 1000 UBC students did last year. Acting politically as well through NGO campaigns, through political parties and through global initiatives for change.

Yes, it is simple. Caring and acting: I could not find a better definition of global citizenship in any learned tome. But I have to add one further component: in between caring and acting comes learning. Learning in classrooms and in labs; learning from those friendships with people from many different backgrounds that enrich the life of a student at a great university; learning from the challenges and trials that we all face in the transition from childhood to



adulthood; learning, I hope, as a part of every day for the rest of our lives. Learning gives us knowledge, skills and approaches that help us turn caring into acting. That is why universities are such fundamental social institutions; they instill the discipline of learning and they help equip us to be citizens. At UBC, I hope that the diversity you have discovered, the friendships you have made, the teachers who have inspired you, and the sheer discovery of your own potential will help lead you graduates down a path to global citizenship, to caring and acting in ways that will benefit all of humankind – starting right at home. Good luck to you all!

Oh...and I hope that we parents can take a moment to experience the thrill -- and the sheer hopefulness -- of seeing children now taking on the roles of responsible, caring adults; adults who have learned what it takes to make a difference in our world. Congratulations to you all. Thank you.

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<sup>1</sup> Diogenes Laertius: Lives of the Eminent Philosophers (1925) translated by R. D. Hicks (Loeb Classical Library).